

GOOD FRIDAY

Holy Week -- a semana santa -- is much more than a church holiday in Brazil; it is an event. Schools are usually closed for the entire week, and stores and other business places closed on Thursday and Friday. On Good Friday itself people do not travel in their cars, trucks, buses and trains do not run, and such a silence prevails over the whole countryside as no Sunday Blue Law advocate ever dared to hope for.

It isn't exactly a fast day -- it's a sort of feast. And yet it is a fast day, too. In the interior town where I lived the regular market day of the week was Saturday, but there was a small market on Wednesday. However, in the Semana Santa, the Saturday market was insignificant, and the Wednesday market was the principal one. But not only that; the Wednesday market of Holy Week was the biggest market in the whole year! The number of people on the streets, the amount of produce to be sold, and the number of buyers, far exceeded any ordinary Saturday market day. It was an ordeal just to get through the crowd on that day. Everything indicates that preparation is being made, not for a fast, but for a feast; for a very special day, which is to be observed in a special kind of way.

Anything may be eaten on Good Friday except meat, which is strictly taboo. The people have a superstitious fear of eating meat on that day, and believe that some sickness or other calamity will surely befall if it is eaten. For most of the people, it does not seem to be a religious principle, or obedience to a determination of the church, so much as a superstitious fear. In my home we used often to eat meat on Good Friday; and the servants would shake their heads dubiously, and the cook would prepare it reluctantly, expecting to see something terrible befall us. But when nothing happened, they would shrug their shoulders and say that in the case of the Galegos all signs might be expected to fail, and any rule be broken with impunity -- but not for them!

But the chief delicacy of the day is fish -- and this, it should be understood,

not as a mere stop-gap on a day when meat is prohibited, but as a delicacy in its own right. While Brazil is nominally Catholic, a large proportion of the people pay little heed to the prescriptions of the Church; but custom has set apart this day as a day to eat fish, and the people follow unquestioningly. It is much the same as in the United States there are many who have no particular religious sentiment associated with Thanksgiving Day, but who nevertheless feel that it is fitting that the day be celebrated with turkey and cranberry sauce, and act accordingly. So, to the Brazilian, Good Friday is a day when fish should be eaten as the special dish of honor.

As a result, fish is greatly in demand for that day. When I first went to Brazil, being fond of fish myself, I sent my hired man to the market on Wednesday of Holy Week, with instructions to get some fresh fish if possible. I was disappointed. I had supposed that because that was a time when many people were accustomed to eat fish, there would be plenty of fish in the market; but I had failed to grasp the tremendous demand for fish at that time, which far exceeds the supply. Fresh fish are preferred, but even on the coast the fisheries are not able to supply the demand, and in the interior it is very difficult to get fresh fish. Many artificial lakes are drained at that season, to secure the fish, and every small pond is seined, and every available fish caught from the rivers. Salt codfish is generally available, and may be combined with coconut to make a very tasty dish. There is also the gigantic fresh water fish of the Amazon region, the pirarucú, which is often referred to as Brazilian codfish, and is salted and dried in the same manner. And there are other varieties of salt fish in the market, some no larger than sardines. Only the most abject poverty will keep any household from having some form of fish on the table on Good Friday.

But still, it is a fast day. The people pay very little attention to the prescribed forty day fast of Lent. They go right on with their same social functions, eat meat as before, seven days in the week. There may be some who eschew meat on Fridays, but I do not think that is observed more during Lent than at other times.

It has seemed to me that the whole forty day fast of Lent has been condensed into a single day -- Good Friday. They do not abstain from food, with the exception of meat; but they do leave off all ordinary activities for the day. Whether this is from devotion, or superstitious fear, or from a general sense of fitness, I am unable to say; but that is what they do. I mentioned already that trains and buses do not run on that day. That is generally true in Pernambuco and the adjoining states, but I am not sure whether it is true of all Brazil. Of course emergencies may arise of such a nature as to require one to travel on that day; but generally speaking, the people stay at home. On Good Friday of 1941 I had occasion to drive in my car from Recife to Garanhuns, a distance of about 175 miles. And to the best of my recollection I neither met nor overtook any vehicle whatever in all that distance!

House servants perform their customary services on Good Friday, though they always expect at least half the day off. But one should not be surprised to ^{see the} maid come in with her face unwashed and her hair uncombed; for that is one of the observances of the day. Tradition has it that on the day that Jesus was crucified his mother was combing her hair (or, as otherwise told, taking a bath -- let us hope it was the former --) when St. Peter brought her the doleful news; and that she straitway resolved never again to comb her hair (or take a bath) on Good Friday. And of course all loyal daughters of Mary are obligated to follow her example. Many of them however, if the truth must be told, are more loyal daughters of Eve than of Mary, and adorn themselves with just as much care on Good Friday as on any other day.

The feature of the day is the religious procession, generally held in the afternoon. This is put on by the Roman Catholic Church, and all the priests, and even the bishops, walk in it. Many of the people walk in it also, but the greater part of the people stand on the sidewalks and watch it pass. It can be heard some distance away, and the sound of it is the sound of death. I have witnessed this procession time after time, but always in the same city. It may be that in other cities the custom is different, but I believe it is fairly uniform. First comes the band, composed mostly of muted horns, and some instrument that makes a horrible clacking sound,

such as a cowbell might make if held in the hand so as to stop the vibrations. It may even be a cowbell, for all I know. I was never able to learn what music is used, but it is some weird music in a minor key, which, accompanied by the rhythmic clacking, is most depressing to one's spirit. After the band come the priests and acolytes, and after them, or perhaps before them, as my memory is not always accurate, is borne a coffin, covered with a canopy. Christ is dead, and they are carrying his body through the streets! Then the people follow, marching slowly and silently after this grim representation. Scarcely a word is spoken by the onlookers; one seems hardly to dare breathe, as the sinister procession winds its appointed way through the streets, and returns to the church.

Good Friday looms far larger in the thought and life of the people of Brazil than Easter. I feel that that is merely an expression of the basic sense of tragedy that underlies the outward gaiety of Latin American life. For myself, I always found myself looking forward to the day with dread, and it was a genuine relief to see it pass.